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ABSTRACT

This study compares the concept of human nature in Germany, Java, and the United States. The study assumes cross-cultural similarities in the formal structure of the concept of human nature, while hypothesizing variation in content, for example, in the value systems. Four components of the concept of human nature were presented (personality theory, social/environmental theory, action theory, process of thought). These components were related by a developmental logic forming these stages: (1) stage I: human beings as actors; (2) stage II: human beings as conveyors of psychological entities such as traits and abilities; (3) stage IIIa: the individual as an autonomous identity, organizing a core of single psychological traits and individual action; (4) stage IIIb: identity conceived as mutual identity; and (5) stage IV: identity conceived as societal or cultural identity. In a career dilemma, Javanese subjects showed higher frequencies at Level IIIa and IIIb, while Germans' highest frequency was at IIIb. Americans showed a more equal distribution for all the stages. The family appeared to be more important for Americans than for Germans. Results of the sorting procedure indicate that Germans and Javanese have the goal of changing society and culture to make a better world, while Americans mostly view their society as the best of all comparable societies. (SH)

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The concept of human nature in three cultures: A developmental approach

Rolf Oerter

Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Seattle, Washington, April 1991

If an investigator is interested in cross-cultural research, he/she is facing the fact that subjects show different concepts of human nature. These different implicit anthropologies are world views and belief systems about human nature that form mental represenations of life experiences. Simultaneously, they are the individual's explanations of how and why persons, including oneself, act in a specific way.
However, as soon as an investigator tries to conceputalize those views of human nature, they become necessarily his/her own constructs. Now, here is my own construct. It is based on a structural approach which fits our data best thus far.

(please insert table 1 about here)

The concept of human nature consists of four components:

- personality theory
- social/environmental theory
- action theory
- process of thought

The vertical relationship between the rows is defined by a developmental logic forming five stages which already fit our data collected before the cross-cultural study began.

The main assumption for the cross-cultural comparison is that the formal structure of the concept of human nature - or of the ethnotheory - is similar in different cultures, while the content, e.g. the value systems, the goals and the means chosen for reaching the goals might vary to a high degree. Thus, the structure becomes the tertium comparationis between the cultures. This approach is - of course - similar to that of Piaget (1977), Kohlberg (1976), or also Osgood(1964).

Now I would like to describe briefly these five stages focussing on stage IIIa to IV which are the main issue of our investigation.
Stage I understands human beings as actors, stage II describes

them as conveyors of psychological entities like traits and abilities.

Stage IIIa conceives the individual as an autonomous identity who is an organizing core of single psychological traits and also the core of individual action. Personality theory uses concepts like self-control, self- realization, autonomy. Social theory conceives others as equal with regard to structure and different with regard to content. Differences between persons are being tolerated, accepted, and people should not intervene in order to respect the autonomy of the other. Action theory considers the consequences of action, however with regard to the own person neglecting to some degree consequences for others. In addition to logical thinking, relativistic thought is needed in order to understand that distinct values and truths are real and acceptable.

At stage IIIb, identity is conceived as mutual identity which means that a single person defines him-/herself through other persons. In one's identity there are also included other identities. Personality theory recognizes that life styles and values of others have to be considered. This leads to the reflection of incompatible life-styles and/or action tendencies. Social theory considers the relations to significant others as indispensable, since identities are defined through each other and through the relations between them. Action theory takes into account the consequences of one's own action for others. Processes of thought necessary for level IIIb are named 'subjective dialectical' because they deal with contradictions which cannot be logically resolved. 'Subjective' refers to the fact that contradictions are located within persons dealing with their own problems.

At stage IV, identity again is conceived more complex as 'societal' and 'cultural' identity. The person understands human beings as members of the culture and society, as being determined by them but also being a necessary element of them to keep them alive. Personality theory deals with contradictions between individual goals and societal demands and unravels the illusion of personal autonomy as unrealistic. Social theory

understands human beings as exchangeable but necessary elements of big systems and conceptualizes - depending on the specific culture - the value of charity and of justice toward every human being as a general principle of mankind. Action theory recognizes that the effectiveness of action cannot be described any longer as a chain ranging from goal-setting to action consequences but as elements of big systems the functioning of which is not predictable through individual action. Dialectical thought is now characterized as objective because contradictions arise from culture and society and exist independently from single person's problems.

Method

Two procedures were used, dilemma stories and a sorting procedure. The dilemmas consisted of a family-job dilemma and of a career dilemma. In the family-job story the actor faces the following situation: The company in which he/she is occupied closes down but offers in another city far away a promising attractive job. The job situation is counterbalanced by the family who also demands the actor's commitment. The career dilemma deals with two friends who have chosen quite different jobs and life-styles. They discuss and defend their own position. The subject is guided by a semi-structured interview in a way that he/she argues at the highest possible level reachable for him/her.

The sorting procedure presents the subjects with preformulated statements of the different stages running from IIIa to IV, stage IV is divided in three substages. The statements were formulated for three domains: self, social, world. The subjects are asked to select those statements that are most similar to their own position. Another task consists of ranking the statements according to a developmental sequence (earlier vs. later in development) assumed by the subject.

The following table shows the samples which were included in the investigation to be reported here. Please note that we were unable thus far to include a comparable sample of lower educated

subjects in America. I have only now run the first 20 subjects.

(please insert table 2 about here)

Results

The following results are limited to subjects with higher education, since the American sample is restricted to this group. In all three cultures stages IIIa to IV could be classified.
We shall first deal with result from the dilemma procedure. Table 3 shows the percentage-distribution of stages produced in three cultures. While in the career dilemma Indonesian (Javanese) subjects show highest frequencies at level IIIa and IIIb, Germans show a clear preference for IIIb, whereas the Americans are characterized by a more equal distribution over all stages under consideration. The family-job dilemma which only could be conducted with the American and German sample shows higher frequencies for stage IIIb and IIIb - IV for the American sample than for the Germans. Content analysis reveals that the family seems to be much more important for Americans than for Germans. Therefore, the confrontation with family problems of the sort of the presented dilemma might have stimulated American subjects in their past life experience more than German individuals.

(please insert table 3 about here)

The next table presents results about types of thought for the three cultures. As you might remember, relativistic thinking corresponds to stage IIIa, subjective dialectical thinking to stage IIIb, and objective dialectical thinking to stage IV. As a main result one should notice that in each culture all levels of thought are represented. This is especially remarkable with regard to the Javanese sample, because in Java other values and concepts are predominant, especially the concept of "rukun" (harmony) which demands that conflicts and contradictions have to be avoided.

(please insert table 4 about here)

Table 5 refers to the concept of décalage. Corresponding to Piaget's results, we find cases where social theory and personality theory do not reach the same level. We do not treat this as a failure of the method but as a developmental phenomenon. It turns out that, contrary to the Indonesian and German sample, the American sample shows the highest frequency in the columm "personal theory" lower than "social/environmental theory". This can be interpreted as a characteristic of American conception of human being (as it is seen by the subject) whereby intra-personal relations are preferred to be decisive, clear and without contradicitons, while the social relations are conceived already as mutual co-defining the own identity.

The social theory of mutual identity is mainly articulated for family relations. Outside the family the American articulates obviously stronger the concept of autonomous self-efficient personality, therefore preferring stage IIIa of personality theory. To bring it to a point, one can claim that America outside the family is a IIIa-society.

(please insert table 5 about here)

Now I would like to present another specific American result. As it is to be seen at table 6, we found regional differences that were predictable. More conservative regions like Tennessee and North Carolina show a lower level, while more liberal areas like Rutgers (New Brunswick) and Berkeley produce higher levels of the concept of human being.

(please insert table 6 about here)

Sorting procedure

Now I will demonstrate some results of the sorting procedure in which the subjects were presented with ready-made statements. First of all, it turned out that the correlation between the two

procedures, dilemma and sorting, was low. That means that both procedures measure different aspects of the construct under consideration.

The explanation of this result may be given in many ways. Let me propose only one. It is easier to evaluate a given concept than to construct a concept, at least both are different tasks.

Table 7 shows the distribution of the stages in three cultures for the domain 'self'. Level IVa is preferred by Germans while level IVc shows a similar frequency of choice for all the three cultures. This picture is different from that of 'social' and 'world' the latter showing a remarkably higher proportion for Germans and Indonesians. The explanation might be simple. Statement IVc expresses active engagement in changing society and culture toward a 'better' world. This goal seems desirable only for Germans and Indonesians, while Americans mostly view their society as best of all comparable (or possible) societies thus not wanting to have any change.

(please insert table 7 about here)

The Germans show the highest proportion of stage IV statements (see table 8) while this difference does not hold for the dilemma procedure.

(please insert table 8 about here)

A further result from the sorting procedure seems interesting. The subjects were asked to rank the statements within the three domains 'self', 'social', and 'world' according to the assumed developmental sequence. Results show that a certain proportion of subjects solved this task according to the theoretically expected order. Other subjects constructed the reverse order, and the remaining proportion accomplished sequences with - in terms of the theory - ambiguous orders. Subjects were grouped in the following way: Those who placed statements of stage IIIa and IIIb in arbitrary sequence <u>first</u> and statements of stage IV in arbitrary sequence <u>behind</u> were labeled as conforming order. Those who ranked statements of stage IIIa and b (again in

arbitrary sequence) behind and statements of stage IV in arbitrary order first were labeled as reverse order. The remaining subjects were classified as 'no order'.

(please insert table 9 about here)

Results (table 9) show that subjects with conforming order are more homogenous in regard to the developmental rank order than those with a reverse order. The remaining group (no order) showed only low similarities in their ranking. This result is true for all of the three cultures (table 10 and 11).

(please insert table 10 and 11 about here)

Some qualitative results

The subjects' arguments concerning the dilemma story were analyzed in several ways.
One way of analysis was simply to look for concepts that were named often and took a crucial role in subject's arguing. In the following I shall be describing some differences only between America and Indonesia.

American subjects accentuated individual happiness as a core concept of implicit anthropology. In most cases, happiness is combined with self-efficacy and control.

A second concept used as an explanation for goal-setting as well as conflict-arousal is money. Most subjects complained the dominant role of money in American society, and at level IV there are interesting explanations for money as the main principle for status in comparison to European historically developed concepts of status. The role of family is evaluated very highly as a place of security and safety in a mobile society. American subjects expressed their pride about freedom and liberty in American society, criticized the American pressure for conformity and rejected interference ('meddling') of the government into personal affairs. On the whole, Americans

showed a general optimistic attitude toward life.

Indonesians, on the other hand, were arguing around the following concepts:

"rukun" (harmony)
All social relations should be maintained in harmony, and everything has to be avoided to distroy harmony. Nevertheless, subjects clearly used dialectical thought.

"gotong royong" (mutual help)
Subjects expressed mutual help as a core activity in all domains of life. Everybody is committed to such help in many situations.

"Rasa tenderam" (soft feelings)
The main goal of emotional state is a kind of soft feeling which avoids strong sorrow (grief) as well as strong feelings of happiness.

Shell model
For Indonesian subjects, not only the family is a setting for mutual relationships but also other social settings which lay around the family like shells are characterized by mutual relations. So the environment (Lingkungan), the village or city quarter and finally the Indonesian society are seen as groups in which mutual relationships are at work.

Finally, inspite of the assumptions of many anthropologists and of cross-cultural psychologists, Javanese subjects not only show a kind of collective identity but also in their conceptualization the concept of autonomous identity how it is described in stage IIIa.

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	culture		
	U.S.A.	West Germany	Indonesia (Java)
n	108	122	110
education	high	high low	high low
age	18-24	16-28	18-24
area	urban rural	urban rural	urban rural
gender	54 males 54 females	61 males 61 females	55 males 55 females

Table 2: Cultural samples and their characteristics

Stage	Label	Personality theory	Social theory	Action theory	Thinking style
I	humans as actors	naming and description of overt actions	possession of persons and objects	action as an entity, no further differentiations: A (G,M,E,C)*	pre-operational, concrete-operational
II	humans as owners of psychological traits	conception of psychological traits, abilities, skills, and competencies	instrumentality of other persons	differentiation of action into: G - M - E	concrete logical and formal logical operations
IIIa	autonomous identity	self-control, self realization, identity as organizing entity of traits and actions	others are equal with regard to structure and different with regard to content	further differentiation of action into: G - M - E - C	relativistic thinking
IIIb	mutual identity	reflection of internal contradictions with regard to incompatible life styles, values, goals	identities are defined through each other and the relations between them. The envolved persons are not exchangeable	consequences of the action for others are considered: G - M - E - C < ego / alter	subjective dialectic thinking
IV	societal (cultural) identity	contradiction between individual and society; incompatibility of societal demands	humans as exchangeable elements of a system which determines the individual (macro-system)	actions as elements of big systems the functioning of which is not predictable through individual actions	objective dialectic thinking

Table 1: Stages of implicit anthropology (concept of human nature)

* A: Action; G: Goal; M: Mean; E: End; C: Consequences

	II-IIIa	IIIa	IIIa-IIIb	IIIb	IIIb-IV	IV
Career dilemma						
USA		15,7	30,6	25,9	16,7	11,2
Indonesia		46,4	23,2	19,6	5,4	5,4
Germany	3,3	3,3	23,3	43,3	20	6,7
family-job dilemma						
USA		1,9	13	51,9	19,4	13,9
Germany	3,3	30	36,7	16,7	-	13,3

Tab. 3: Distribution of the stages of the concept of human nature in three cultures

	Career dilemma					
	II-IIIa	IIIa	IIIa-IIIb	IIIb	IIIb-IV	IV
USA		14,8	32,4	31,5	14,8	6,5
Indonesia	1,8	32,1	23,2	30,4	7,1	7,1
Germany	3,3	20,7	13,8	44,8	6,9	10,5

IIIa is related to relativistic thought

IIIb is related to subjective dialectical thought

IV is related to objective dialectical thought

Stages in between indicate transitions of thinking styles

Tab. 4: Distribution of thinking styles in three cultures

	PT < ST	PT = ST	PT > ST
Indonesia	32,1	50	17,9
USA	62,5	29,9	7,6
Germany	20	56,7	23,3

Table 5: Décalages between personality theory (PT) and social/environmental theory (ST) in three cultures

Career-Dilemma:

	n*	h*	N
R & B	25	17	42
C & K	35	9	44
N	60	26	86

n*: Stages IIIa,IIIa-b,IIIb
h*: Stages IIIb-IV,IV
R & B: RUTGERS & BERKELEY
C & K: CHAPEL HILL & KNOXVILLE

$chi^2 = 3,19$ $p < 0.04$ (one-sided)

Family-Job-Dilemma:

	n*	h*	N
R & B	23	19	42
C & K	31	13	44
N	60	26	86

n*: Stages IIIa,IIIa-b,IIIb
h*: Stages IIIb-IV,IV
R & B: RUTGERS & BERKELEY
C & K: CHAPEL HILL & KNOXVILLE

$chi^2 = 1,64$ $p < o.1o$ (one-sided)

Table 6: Comparison of conceptual levels between four regions of USA

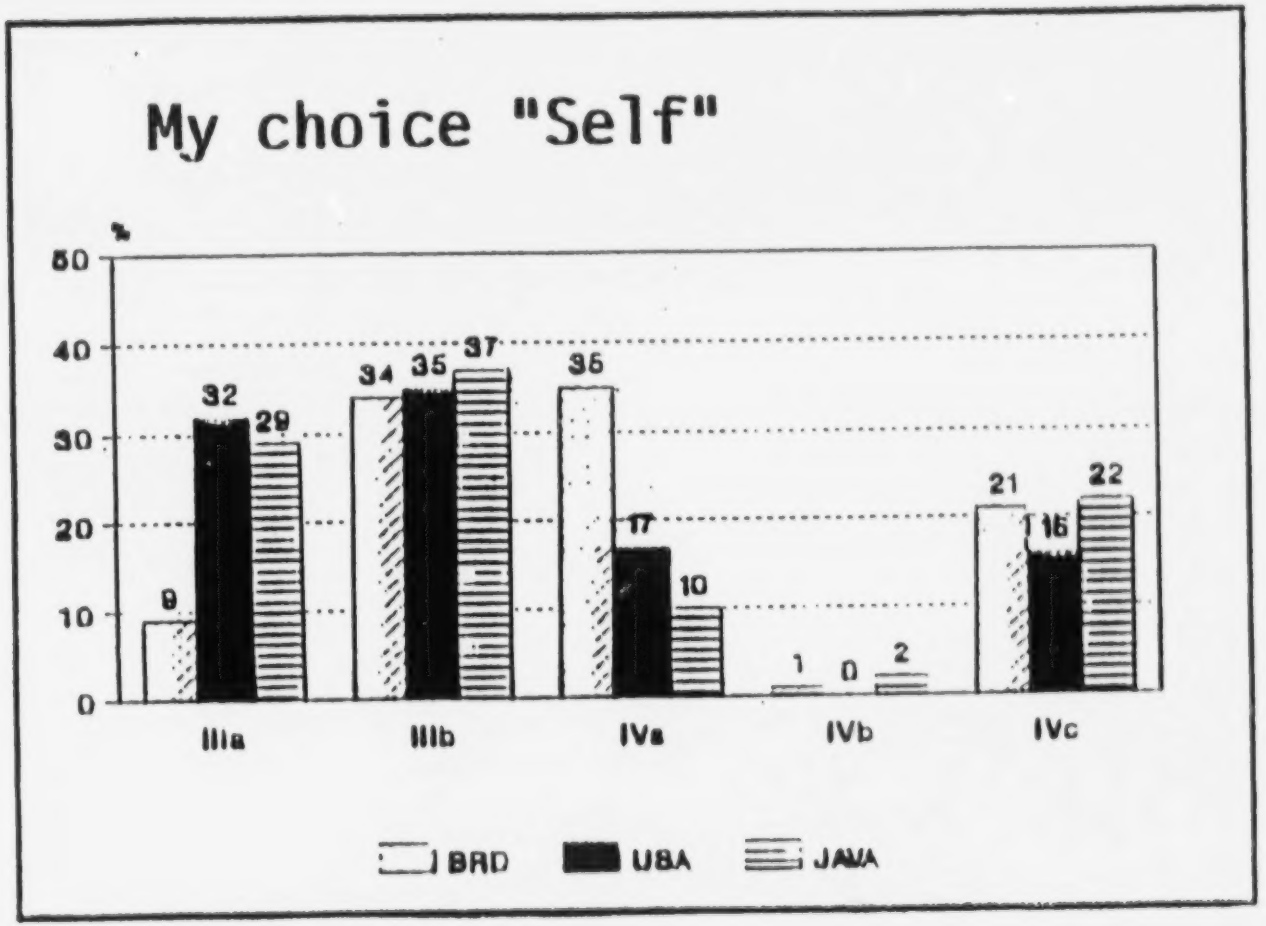

Table 7: Distributions of choices in the sorting procedure for the domain "self"

Proportion of IV	Self	Social	World	Rank
BRD	57,2	36,3	59,5	1
USA	33,3	24,8	30,7	3
JAVA	34,0	28,6	47,6	2

Table 8: Proportion of choices of stage IV statements in three cultures

GERMANY	KENDALLs W (χ^2-Test)		
	Self	Social	World
inverse order	.5163 (.0000) *EDCBA*	.4977 (.0000) *CEDAB*	.5130 (.0000) *DECAB*
no order	.2129 (.0000) *ADBCE*	.0771 (.0551) *ADBCE*	.1104 (.0057) *ABCDE*
conforming order	.8052 (.0000) *ABCDE*	.7694 (.0000) *ABDCE*	.7853 (.0000) *ABCDE*

Legend: Capital letters A to E indicate the sequence of the five stages and substages. Alphabetic order is the theoretically expected order.

Table 9: Similarities of subjects' developmental orders for three types of ranking in Germany

USA	KENDALLs W (χ^2-Test)		
	Self	Social	World
inverse order	.5988 (.0000) *DECBA*	.5967 (.0000) *DCEBA*	.6003 (.0000) *DECAB*
no order	.0967 (.0106) *ADCBE*	.0619 (.0856) *ADCBE*	.1938 (.0000) *ACDBE*
conforming order	.7676 (.0000) *ABCDE*	.7849 (.0000) *BACDE*	.7801 (.0000) *ABCDE*

(Legend see Table 9)

Table 10: Similarities of subjects' developmental orders for three types of ranking in USA

JAVA	KENDALLs W (χ^2-Test)		
	Self	Social	World
inverse order	.4704 (.0000) *DCEAB*	.4851 (.0000) *CDEAB*	.5662 (.0000) *DECAB*
no order	.1462 (.0000) *BDACE*	.0840 (.0033) *ACDBE*	.1370 (.0040) *ACDBE*
conforming order	.8068 (.0000) *BACED*	.7684 (.0000) *ABCDE*	.7965 (.0000) *ABCDE*

(Legend see table 9)

Table 11: Similarities of subjects' developmental order for three types of ranking in Java